

THE TATTOO

John Boston

She went by the name of Willow. No one knew if it was her real name or not. Kirk had been hanging out with her for the past few weeks. Literally, just hanging out. They had kissed two nights before, but that was it. She may have been homeless but, even homeless people have morals. She even had a job. She just didn't have a home. She lived in the park with the rest of the unwanted and unloved. Kirk was smitten with her. He knew she had demons. She didn't try and hide it. Kirk was young and naïve enough to think he could save her from herself if someone had just shown her a little bit of kindness. Now, here she was, laying on a park bench, deader than a doornail. Kirk lifted her dead arm. She was not cool, but still warm. She had been dead for less than a few hours.

Jamarcus found her first. He texted Kirk, who came speeding over. When he got there, another dude named Monkey was standing beside her. Jamarcus stopped him before he approached.

"She's dead Kirk.....like really dead," he said.

Kirk ran over to her and knelt beside her body.

"I told her to go easy on that stuff. Shit will kill you if you don't respect it," said Monkey.

"How the hell did this happen?" asked Kirk.

"She was a junkie. It was just a matter of time," said Jamarcus.

Kirk said nothing and just held her hand. He spent the next ten minutes feeling for a pulse. There was none. She was gone.

"I'm sorry man. You want me to call the cops?" asked Jamarcus.

"No.....they'll just stick her in the ground in an unmarked grave.....cause that's what the world does to people like us..... stick us in unmarked graves so they don't have to remember us," said Kirk.

"Did she have any family or anything?" asked Monkey

"She hasn't spoken to her parents in almost a year. They were divorced. Her dad molested her when she was a teenager. Her mom was about worthless." said Kirk.

"They should still know their daughter is dead."

"I don't even know if Willow is her real name or not. I think she was from the Bay area. That's all she told me."

"Kirk, I know she was your girl and all, but she's dead. She ain't coming back. We got to call the cops or something," said Jamarcus.

"Her money.....where is it?" asked Kirk

"What money?"

"She worked for the last three months at that shitty job at that Laundromat so she could save up enough money to buy that tattoo she's always wanted."

"It must be in her car," said Jamarcus

The three of them ran across the parking lot to her old Toyota. Kirk had taken the keys out of her pocket and unlocked the door. It took him several minutes, but he finally found it. There were almost two thousand dollars rolled up in hundreds. It was her life savings.

"Kirk.....taking her money just doesn't seem right," said Jamarcus.

"It's not going to do her much good," said Monkey.

"Yes, I'm taking her money.....*and I'm going to use it to buy her that fucking tattoo she's always wanted,*" he said.

Monkey and Jamarcus just looked at one another in silence. They were both thinking the same thing.

This crazy cracker has lost his mind!

"What do you mean you're going to get her that tattoo? She's dead. How the hell can she get a tattoo if he's dead?"

"She's dead, but it's not like she's decomposing or anything. All she talked about was getting that tattoo. That's why she was living out of her car in this dump. She was trying to quit using. The tattoo was going to be the start of her new life. It's not fair. She came so close." said Kirk tearing up.

"Kirk.....you can't put a tattoo on a dead person. It's just not right," said Jamarcus.

"Neither is having your father molest you.....or having your mom get you hooked on heroin.....but, that's the hand she was dealt. No, screw it. I'll find somebody who will get her that tattoo. Somebody will do it."

"Kirk.....dude. She's dead. Wherever she is, I can guarantee she's not worried about getting that tat anymore."

"How do you know that? How do we know the afterlife is so magical and wonderful. It's probably just as fucked up as this world. Probably some rich asshole up in heaven that will assign us a number as soon as we cross over and tell us to get to work making clouds or something. I want to know if the afterlife is so goddamn magical, then why does this world suck so bad?"

Moneky and Jamarcus looked at Kirk with both sadness and despair. Kirk was crying now. He was angry. Angry at Willow. Angry at himself.....just plain angry. No one said a word as Kirk walked back over to her body. They knew he was crazy.....*but, this was a whole other level of crazy.*

"I'm going to get her that tattoo, then I'm going to give her a proper Christian burial. She may have been a homeless junkie, but she still went to church when she could. I'm not going to let them just cremate her and stick her in the ground. I'm going to give her the burial she deserves, with like flowers and stuff." he said as he picked up her dead body and loaded it into his old station wagon.

"I'm tired of this shitty world always winning. Well.....this time it isn't," he said as he drove off.

"That white boy is crazy," said Jamarcus.

"Did he leave her car door unlocked?" asked Monkey.

"Yeah.....he sure did."

The two men turned around and walked quickly back to her car. After all, Willow was dead. What good was any of her stuff going to do to her now, they figured. Finders keepers was the law of the land out here.....that and don't be an a-hole. That was just as important to the homeless community. There weren't many rules out here, but the few that they had were to be followed at all times.....with no exceptions.

Kirk knew he was on borrowed time. He had a very, very small window of opportunity to get it done. After six hours, her corpse would begin showing signs of decomposition. After ten hours, it would start to stink. In this heat, that time frame might even be tighter. Rigor mortis was already setting in. In another twelve hours, she would be stiffer than a board. He looked over at Willow and smiled. She was probably looking right down at him this very second and giving him a huge thumbs up from heaven. He wasn't just doing it out of love for Willow, he was doing this for himself. He was tired of doing everything right and still failing. He was tired of being one of the *useless eaters* of this world, simply because he hadn't been born into the right family. He worked in construction and home building but had been laid off when Covid hit. He was on unemployment for a while, but when that ran out, he simply walked away from his previous life. He lived in an abandoned gas station out in the desert for a while, but the summer heat in Arizona can be unbearable. At least in the city, he could cool off, or go swimming in the irrigation canals. Being a squatter out in the middle of nowhere might sound appealing to some but the reality was something else. He did miss the quiet of the desert nights, or the occasional rainstorm that watered the desert. He remembers the first monsoon rain of the season when it hit the desert floor. He danced in it for almost half an hour, letting it soak his clothes and body. He

had never felt so refreshed in his life. He just wished Willow could have been there to experience it with him. Maybe in some way, she could now.

Kirk knew he couldn't dare to go to a mainstream tattoo shop. They would probably call the cops on him. He had spent a few months in jail for breaking and entering last year and met a guy named Lucky, who did jailhouse tattoos. He was pretty good. Lucky had a small shop near Tucson. He wasn't sure if Lucky would do it or not but he figured he was his best bet. He searched and searched for his shop on his phone, but couldn't find anything. He knew there were a bunch of tattoo shops in Phoenix of varying quality. He figured at this moment, he was going to have to be a little flexible if this was going to get done. He found one that closed at eleven PM. He figured that was his best bet. It was in the old part of the city that was pretty run down. He didn't think it was the type of place that college students or suburban soccer moms would go to get their first tattoo.

It was cool and raining in Phoenix, which was unusual for this time of year.

Kirk had caught a break. He drove around the city with her dead body in his car for a few hours. He found a small tattoo shop that was out of some guy's garage. It looked like ghetto, which was exactly what Kirk was looking for.

The type of person who is so desperate for money they might just be willing to ignore the fact that the person getting the tattoo done is not alive anymore.

Kirk parked outside the man's house on the street. He saw a girl walking out the door. He figured it was now or never. He made sure not to park within sight of the shop in case he was followed. One wrong move here and he was going to jail. There was really no easy way to do this. He just had to ask.

He saw lights on inside and walked in. an older man with a ponytail was sitting in his chair reading the paper.

"Yo," he said.

"Hi. You do tattoos, right?" asked Kirk.

"Been doing them for almost forty years. What are you looking for? I can even do 3d tattoos."

"It's not for me. It's for my girlfriend. Do you have somebody who does tattoos near Tucson. His name is Lucky." asked Kirk.

"Sure do. Lucky Thompson. Yeah, he had some real bad people staying with him. Cops raided the place and shut him down. Last I hear he moved back with his parents in Idaho."

"Oh.....well then. I guess you're my only chance. My name is Kirk."

"Kirk, please to meet you. I'm Cyrus. I work out of this place cause the rent in Phoenix is so goddamn ridiculous with all these Californians moving in. Don't worry, I do good work. I've got photo albums behind you if you want to see them."

Kirk knew he had only one shot. He had to corner old Cyrus here before he could say no.

"Let me get my girlfriend. I know exactly what she wants. She has a bunch of pictures in her notebook. It shouldn't be too hard."

"Bring her in," said Cyrus.

Kirk walked out to his car. It was raining out pretty hard. In the distance, he could see the sunlight trying to poke through the clouds. He opened her car door and scooped her out. She was small but pretty thick. He threw her over his shoulder and walked back to the shop.

He kicked open the door and dropped Willow in the chair. Cyrus was clearly not amused. He reached over behind his desk. Kirk knew what was coming next.

"Cyrus.....drop it!" said Kirk pulling out his 9mm.

Cyrus looked at him and put down whatever weapon he had in his hand. He raised his hands in the air. Kirk could see he was nervous, that was understandable.

"Look, man.....I don't want to have to shoot you, I really don't. I'm not a criminal, I just want you to do this tattoo for Willow. Please, it would mean a lot to her."

Cyrus didn't seem to know what to do or say. Kirk's gun meant he was deadly serious. He didn't want to risk getting shot, but he had no idea how insane this guy was.

"I'll pay you for the tattoo. I've got two thousand dollars here. You can take it all." he said, pulling out his wad of cash.

"Fine. Just wake her up and we'll get started," said Cyrus.

"Yeah.....about that. I'm afraid she can't wake up."

"What do you mean she can't wake up, is she dead or something?"

"Well.....yes. She overdosed this morning."

"So, you want me to tattoo a dead person. Are you insane?" asked Cyrus

"What difference does it make? It's not like her skin is falling off or something."

"You've been driving around with a dead body in your car?"

"Are you going to do it or not," said Kirk pointing his gun at him.

"If you shoot me, then who will do the tattoo?"

"Good point. I guess if you don't, then I will just shoot the next person who comes through that door. That cute little lady I saw earlier, I'm guessing she's your daughter?"

"She was just a customer. You'd just shoot a person for coming through that door? Someone who did nothing to you. You'd just kill them?" asked Cyrus

"No Cyrus, you'd be killing them. You'd better get started before she starts to stink. Said Kirk

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because it would mean a lot to her. She's a junkie. She's had a very difficult life and had had to go through things you couldn't imagine. I just want her to be happy for once in her life."

"Oh, I see. She's had a hard life? Well, so have I. I can trade sob stories with you all day long but, I don't put guns in people's faces."

"You're just like me. The only difference is that I'm not going to let life beat me down any longer. She lived in her car so she could save up enough money for this tattoo. It would really mean a lot to her."

"Kirk.....she's dead. Why would she care if you tattoo her dead body?" asked Cyrus.

"I want her to know that there was somebody in this fucked up world that cared about her and wasn't going to hurt her. I don't think in her whole life she ever experienced that."

Cyrus just looked at Kirk with pity and disgust. This was still very hard to take in.

"You can put the gun away. I'll put ink on her. Put the money on the table." said Cyrus.

Kirk put his wad of cash on the table but didn't put the gun away. He liked to keep his options on the table, so to speak.

Cyrus looked through the notebook to get some kind of an idea of what she wanted.

"She wanted a sunrise, over the mountains. Nothing fancy, black and white ink is fine."

"I've never done a tattoo on a dead person before. I read somewhere that the fat in their skin is going to break down and mess up the ink. I can't guarantee how it will look."

"Fine. Just do your best," said Kirk.

Cyrus recoiled when he picked up her arm.

"Jesus, she's ice cold."

"That's what happens when you die."

"Help me turn her over."

"No funny business. I'm trusting you," said Kirk as he tucked his gun into his waist.

He helped Kirk turn her over. Her body had become very stiff and the blood was beginning to pool. Parts of her body had already turned white and were almost cold to the touch. Kirk lifted her shirt up and helped Cyrus clean her back with alcohol. He got his ink tray set up and went to work.

"First time for everything I guess," he said as the needle went through her skin.

Cyrus began working on Willow much the same way he did anyone else. Prep work, sterilization, outline, then ink. Her skin was almost rubbery. He knew this was a bad idea.

"I make no guarantees about this. It might come out like shit," he said.

"So has everything else in her life. Won't be much of a change," said Kirk.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because no one else will."

"That's not much of a reason."

"It is to me," said Kirk.

"She's almost cold. Like a doll that's been left outside or something," said Cyrus sterilizing her skin.

"Cyrus, I don't question your life choices, please extend me the same courtesy."

"I don't go pointing guns at people either," he replied.

"You and Willow, you aren't so different."

"Oh yeah? Why is that?"

"You've both been fighting life, instead of living it. The only difference is that you're still fighting, she's not. She's had enough." said Kirk.

"I don't see how you know me well enough to say something like that."

"I can see what's in front of me. Your tats.....I used to think people got tattoos for attention. Sometimes they do, but yours.....they're just covering up your pain." said Kirk.

"What are you now a shrink?" he said as he began outlining her.

"Just call them like I see them, that's all."

"Kirk.....you might think you're some kind of special person, that what you're doing has some special meaning. You're wrong. You're just another junkie, just like all the rest of them. All you junkies come to the needle for different reasons but, you all end up the same, no matter who you

are. I'm guessing pretty soon, you're going to need your next fix. Hell of a monkey to have on your back."

"I stopped a year ago. Haven't shot up since. I just kill myself with cigarettes now." said Kirk.

"It's always there now, isn't it? Like some monster, waiting in the background for the right moment to strike. Just when you think you've gotten rid of that damn monkey forever, he comes right back. Once a junkie, always a junkie." said Kirk.

"You're not winning any points with me, Cyrus."

"I'm not trying to. I just call them like I see them, too."

Cyrus went to work. He had to go slow, this was his first corpse. The ink almost ran off her, instead of being absorbed by the skin. It wasn't impossible, just not great either. He hated doing half-ass work, even on a corpse. He watched Kirk from the corner of his eye. The kid looked like someone who was still trying to figure out life and by the time he did, he would realize his life had simply passed him by. By the time you figure out the rules of the game, the game is pretty much over. You're an old man, who can only take solace in the fact that next time around, you'll do it much better. You won't get hooked on drugs and wind up on the streets or sleeping in abandoned buildings and eating out of dumpsters. You won't get weird diseases and die in your forties because you couldn't afford to go to a hospital. You're going to live like a king because now, you know.

"How's it going?"

"I'd be lying if I said it was going well."

"That's not what I want to hear," said Kirk.

"Her skin.....it's decomposing. This is the best I can do," he said working his needle gun.

They didn't say much for the next hour. Kirk was praying that no one else came into his tattoo shop. He had put up a closed sign and closed the blinds to Cyrus's shop. He wasn't sure if it was going to work. If anyone did come into the shop, then.....*all bets were off*. Kirk saw how the tattoo was coming to life. He thought it looked great. He knew Willow was looking down at him right now and smiling.

"Kirk.....what are you going to do when you leave here? If you don't mind me asking?"

"I do mind."

"Well.....we do have ourselves a bit of a problem."

"What problem?"

"Well.....I guess I'm wondering what you're going to do to me when all this is said and done."

"I told you. I'm going to pay you and leave. I'm not perfect but, I'm not a liar either." said Kirk.

"You're just going to leave here, just like that, and ride off into the sunset with this dead body?"

"Pretty much."

"Kirk.....she stinks so bad, I can smell it coming through my mask. I'm wearing two surgical masks and I can still smell here. My shop is going to smell like decomposing body for the next week. She's dead dude.....she's gone. She ain't coming back."

"I know."

"So then, what are you going to do with her?"

"I guess I'll call her parents. I mean it is the Christian thing to do after all."

"I see. What if they don't answer or say they don't care what you do with her?"

"Well, then I guess I will give her a proper Christian burial, with a priest and all."

"How are you going to pay for that?"

"With money."

"Funerals are expensive. I think you're just going to bury her in the desert and be done with her."

"Would that be so wrong?"

"Was she like your girlfriend or something?"

"No, she was just a friend."

"Come on Kirk. Let's not hold back on one another, not after all this."

"That's all. She was just someone who used to hang out at the park with us. She was cool when she wasn't using."

"Most junkies are."

"She would turn into Mr. Hyde when that shit hit her veins. All she wanted was this tattoo. That's the whole reason I'm doing this. I'm just trying to make her happy."

"You don't think she's happy right now? At least she doesn't have to shoot heroin into her body anymore," said Cyrus as he switched inks.

"I don't know where she is. I hope she's happy and with good people. That's all any of us can hope for."

"Do you buy this whole afterlife thing?"

"Yes."

"I mean you think there's some bright light that warms your soul and makes you forget about how horrible this world is?"

"I do."

"I'm not convinced. I think it's just another lie we've been told."

"Come on Cyrus, let's not lie to one another, not after how far we've come."

"I'm not lying."

"Of course you are. You and I, we're the same. We're not so different. If you really thought this was all there was to it and nothing else, you'd of blown your brains out a long time ago and ended this whole shit show."

"You think you know me, Kirk?"

"Yup. I knew you were one of us as soon as I walked in here. That's why I didn't walk out. I knew you and I could easily be in one another's shoes right now. You and I, we both walked in the same shit, only you somehow managed to pull yourself out of it."

"Kirk, you have such incredible self-confidence from a person with so little life experience," said Cyrus.

"Just 'cause I'm young doesn't mean I don't have any life experience."

"You ever fought a war, Kirk?"

"No."

"Well, I have. You can talk to me about life experience after you've watched your best friend's balls being blown off by a landmine and hear him screaming. No matter how old you get, or where life takes you, you can never forget that sound. It was thirty years ago and I can still hear him screaming today. It never went away."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too."

"No, I really am. I guess my life experience was just different but just as depressing. I told you we aren't so different."

"No Kirk, the difference is that I was lied to by people I trusted. You just went off and ruined your own life. No one lied to you."

"Everyone lied to me. Even my own parents."

"What lie did they tell you?"

"I found out my mom was going to abort me but her parents talked her out of it. See, I was never meant to be in this world. I was never meant to be born." said Kirk tearing up.

"Yet, here you are, in all your glory."

"I just never understood. Can you imagine how you would feel if the one person in this world who is supposed to love you tells you she almost murdered you? How would that make you feel?" said Kirk, crying.

"I guess it wouldn't make me feel very good," said Cyrus softly.

"You think that because you were in a war that the pain you feel makes you different from everyone else who is suffering. It isn't. We are all suffering."

"That's where you fell off the wagon? When you found out your mother was going to abort you? Shouldn't you just be thankful she didn't? I'm guessing she was young and scared. She didn't have many good options. I'm wondering how many mothers had the same thought when they found out they were pregnant." said Cyrus.

"I don't know. It's not that. She just never wanted me. She never wanted me and she wasn't going to hide it. It was almost as if she was angry at her parents for telling her to keep me. I guess I became my own worst enemy." said Kirk.

"A lot of us do Kirk. It's not your fault but, you can't blame your mother for the choices you make now. We're all in this shit show together. You me and blondie here." he said changing ink cartridges.

"It's really coming out pretty good Cyrus. I figured you were going to fuck it up on purpose and I'd have to shoot you. You really do good work. I'm going to give you a five-star review."

"Don't do me any favors. I just want you two out of here so I can start fumigating my shop."

"Yeah, I do apologize for that. I was going to try and hose her off before we came in here but I couldn't find one. I went to a drive-through car wash but I figured too many people would see me and report me to the cops."

"You thought of everything Kirk."

"I just wanted to make her happy."

"Kirk, if she wanted the damn tattoo, why didn't she just get it herself? She had more than enough money."

"Maybe she was just scared? It was her first tattoo."

"Kirk, I've watched so many people come in here for their first tattoo and chicken out, I lost count. If she wanted the damn tattoo, she would have gotten it."

"Maybe. Maybe she just needed someone to go with her and hold her hand."

"Maybe she was just in love with the idea of getting one, not the reality of getting one."

"Maybe. I don't know. How's it coming?"

"It's getting there. Kirk, I just want you to know something."

"What?"

"I don't like you. I've lived a hard life. Not a very happy one. I've never pointed a gun at anyone, not ever. Gotten into a few fistfights but, I've never pointed a gun at anyone. That's the difference between you and me. I think you're a piece of shit." he said, putting more ink on Willow's corpse.

Kirk took out his gun and pointed it at him. Cyrus stopped and looked at the barrel of the revolver pointed right at his head. Kirk squeezed the trigger several times. The cylinder was empty. The gun was unloaded.

"I pointed an empty gun at you Cyrus....an empty gun. Get over yourself," said Kirk.

Cyrus went back to work. The tattoo was coming out much better than he originally anticipated. He just wanted to get paid and to get these two out of here as quickly as possible. He just wanted to forget about this day....and this dead body he was working on. The kid had gotten underneath his skin. He still wasn't sure if he was going to shoot him, or just send him on his way. In his years he had learned that real genuine human compassion is forgiveness. It's recognizing that the person that did you harm is the real victim, not you. The kid had made him feel things he had buried deep within his subconscious. It was about realizing that the world is not rainbows and sunshine, far from it but, that doesn't mean you have to let it destroy you either. God puts all of us in this gigantic insane asylum for a reason, if for nothing else so that we can learn from our mistakes. Some of us learn much more quickly than others. Some of us never learn. What Kirk was doing was wrong on so many levels but, he was doing it out of love and compassion. As screwed up as Kirk was, in his screwed up world, he was doing the right thing. It was just up to the rest of us to recognize that.

It was not his best work but, it was his best work he had ever done on a dead body. Kirk was ecstatic. He threw his arms around him and thanked him. He put the money on the table.

"I'd give you more if I could."

"Kirk.....I can't take your money. It just wouldn't be right."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I just don't want to take it."

"Well, I insist. You've earned every penny of it. I won't take no for an answer."

Cyrus put the gauze pad over the tattoo and loaded it up with ointment, only to realize the pointlessness of what he was doing. Her skin would be falling off before the ink was completely dry.

"Kirk.....I'll take the money on one condition."

"What?"

"I don't ever want to see you, or her, again. Is that clear?"

"Sure.....sure, no problem. Thank you, Cyrus. From the bottom of both our hearts, thank you. You have no idea what this means to me." he said as he scooped her up. The smell was now so bad, even Kirk had to hold his nose. It was going to be hot the next few days. He had to get her in the ground before she got any worse.

"Cyrus?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry I pointed an empty gun at you. Even an empty gun, it wasn't right. You're a good man. I had no right to do that." said Kirk with his hand on the doorknob.

"Just don't ever do that again Kirk. I don't like guns. I've seen what they can do to a human body."

Kirk just nodded and left the tattoo shop. He was torn. Did he call the cops and rain on Kirk's psychotic parade, or just let the kid ride off into the sunset into his next disaster? He didn't have to wait very long. The next morning two detectives from the Gila Bend PD were knocking at his door.

Kirk had turned himself in yesterday afternoon. He drove to the nearest police station and surrendered. Needless to say, there was quite a bit of interest as to what really went on yesterday at his shop. One of the detectives became unglued. His face was almost glowing with rage.

"JESUS CHRIST, HE WAS DRIVING AROUND TOWN WITH A DEAD BODY IN HIS CAR AND YOU DIDN'T THINK TO CALL SOMEBODY?" he screamed.

"The girl was dead. What difference was it going to make?"

"Come on man, you're going to have to do better than that." said the other cop.

"I don't know, I just felt sorry for the kid. What's going to happen to him?" asked Cyrus.

"He'll be charged with something, I don't know exactly what. We can't prove he gave her the drugs that killed her and the people that found her backed up his story, so probably not much. I just can't understand why you never called us.....or called somebody."

"I don't have to justify my actions to either of you. Am I under arrest?"

"No, not yet."

"Then fuck off," he said and slammed the door in their faces.

In the days and weeks that followed, he got calls and texts, then more calls and more texts. The business was booming, but not in the way he had ever imagined. The media had made him into some kind of macabre superhero who had helped out a distraught, borderline psychotic person when they needed help. Kirk wasn't a criminal, only a victim. There are no criminals anymore, only unrecognized victims. Kirk had gotten his fifteen minutes of fame and then some. The media had tracked down Willow's parents. They put on their game faces for the cameras and pretended like they were distraught but Cyrus could see right through their bullshit. They weren't sorry she was dead, only sorry that they had to foot the bill for her funeral. The next day, he started getting calls and messages from people asking him if he would work on their sons, daughters, and loved ones. Some were dying, some were already dead. Cyrus was overwhelmed. So many people wanted him to put ink on their deceased loved ones. So many people, so much money. He wasn't surprised by the fame and notoriety. He kind of expected it. He shouldn't have been surprised by any of it.

Cause deep down inside, he was Kirk. The world was filled with Kirks and Willows. Not all love stories end happily ever after but, this was the most honest love story he had ever seen.